66th Session of the General Assembly
First Committee

Cluster Nuclear Weapons:
De-alerting – Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems

New York, 13 October 2011

H.E. Mr. Alexandre Fasel
Permanent Representative of Switzerland
to the Conference on Disarmament

Mr Chairman,

I take the floor on behalf of Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Switzerland and Malaysia - our current co-ordinator who unfortunately cannot be here today due to their chairmanship of the Third Committee - on the issue of decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems.

Since 2007 our countries have called for action to address the significant numbers of nuclear weapons that remain today at high levels of readiness. Our countries believe there is an urgent need for action to address this situation.

It remains of deep and abiding concern to us that twenty years after the end of the Cold War, doctrinal aspects from that era – such as high alert levels – are perpetuated today. While the tensions that marked the international security climate during the Cold War have lowered, corresponding decreases in the alert levels of the arsenals of the largest nuclear-weapon states have not been forthcoming.

We welcome the lower levels of alert adopted by some nuclear-weapon States. As with all other nuclear disarmament measures, it is the view of our Group that steps to decrease the operational readiness of nuclear weapons should be irreversible, transparent and verifiable.

We welcome recent reductions in the numbers of nuclear weapons. What is also required is increased recognition that the high level of alert of those nuclear weapons that remain is disproportionate to the current strategic situation and that steps should be taken to address this inconsistency. We are disappointed that recent reviews of nuclear doctrine have not
resulted in lowered levels of alert. We are encouraged, however, that the door has been left open for further work in this area and look forward to receiving an update on how this work is progressing.

We note the recognition of last year's NPT Review Conference of the issue of de-alerting and welcome the commitment by the nuclear-weapon States to "consider the legitimate interest of non-nuclear weapon States in further reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems" on which they are to report on in 2014. Reports in the interim on how this work is progressing would be most welcome and we will be pursuing updates at the preparatory committee meetings during the forthcoming NPT review cycle. We believe it is of utmost importance to achieve greater transparency levels than exist at the moment with regard to such military doctrines. We view progress in this regard as a major task for the years ahead which could facilitate further reductions of alert levels.

We have also taken heart from the recommitment contained in the Action Plan by the nuclear-weapon States to accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament contained in the 2000 NPT outcome document given the strong reference in that document for action on operational readiness.

A lowered operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems would represent an important interim step towards a nuclear-weapon-free world. It would demonstrate a palpable commitment to a diminishing role for nuclear weapons. In addition, steps to lengthen the decision-making "fuse" for the launch of any nuclear attack would minimise the risk of unintentional or accidental use.

We are keen to capitalise on changes in the global security environment since the end of the Cold War. The adversarial relationships of those bleak times are clearly behind us and the threat of a conflict among major powers has become remote. Against this backdrop, the rationale for high-alert levels has lost its salience.

Mr Chairman

Our countries have presented a resolution on this issue to previous sessions of the General Assembly. While we remain committed to the operational readiness issue, we will not be tabling a resolution this year. Rather, we will be looking ahead to the forthcoming review cycle of the NPT, starting with next year's preparatory committee meeting in Vienna, and measuring progress in that context. We will be putting forward a paper for discussion next year that canvasses the substantive arguments in favour of lowering the operational readiness of nuclear arsenals — as well as considering the full range of steps available in the multilateral political process to take the issue forward.

We will spare no efforts in advocating for progress towards lowering operational readiness in all relevant fora, including at the General Assembly, and will look to revisit our resolution next year.